



Aug. 3 Forgiveness: The Divine Answer Part 1

What if forgiveness is the answer? What if forgiveness is the answer to a question we don't even think to ask? For instance, how could we get along better with one another in this world, in our church, in our workplaces and families?

Without forgiveness marriages fall apart, friendships stall out, and families just keep hurting one another. Without forgiveness people walk around wounded, churches plateau and fracture, societies atrophy at best and at worst...civil war.

Forgiveness is the answer.

A quality in satisfying relationships. Needed for productive work and teaming, building a healthier church culture, and being part of a civil society.

Without forgiveness...either in giving it or in receiving it; we end up carrying around resentment and bitterness and become burdened by regrets and pain.

Forgiveness is our answer.

Because as humans we are bound to hurt others and others are bound to hurt us. We are starting a new sermon series today called Forgiveness based on a book with that same name by Adam Hamilton.

Meaning forgiveness will be our answer for the next four weeks.

Four summers ago, I experienced forgiveness as the answer in a unique way.

I had been downsizing, decluttering, and re-organizing what I owned. Because who needs six fishing poles?

After my dad passed away, I ended up adding many of his things to my home. Just plopped it down where there was room.

But as I began walking through the house, decluttering drawers and closets and the basement and garage stalls; I was surprised to hear myself saying out loud, "Well, you just have to forgive yourself, Amy."

Huh?! Forgive myself? Why was I saying that to myself?!

But it was true. I would look at things in the home, something I thought I was going to use, or read, or wear or use to honor my dad...but it just never happened.

And there it would sit...incriminating me, silently judging and condemning me. And then I found myself spending more and more energy in NOT seeing those things!

I spent energy stuffing the feelings of disappointment and regret that arose in the things that didn't get used. All that felt heavy.

I'm not saying I'm normal folks.

But in deciding to let something material go, to declutter; I had also stumbled upon the need to take an emotional and spiritual step, such as a step to forgive myself. That was surprising to me.

But when I started forgiving myself, such a good feeling! It brought freedom, which helped me get rid of more stuff. Which brought joy. It was so life giving. Living with less regrets and guilt and stuff feels so good.

How strange to find myself forgiving myself thru decluttering. And to find that kind of forgiveness, forgiving self even, is the answer.

And it got me thinking...what could forgiveness mean in other relationships in my life? There is a relationship with self, our relationship with God, and others. What good could come to me thru offering the gift of forgiveness to others?

And what good could come to us if we did that?

What space could we create for more of God at BUMC? What wonderful surprises are in store for us if we did a little decluttering of unforgiveness in our own lives and relationships, but especially in this faith community?

It's my desire, and more importantly God's heart, as we head into this topic of forgiveness is to experience a little more freedom. To feel lighter. To let things go.

To have more energy, open the windows and let in a fresh breeze of forgiveness in, create space for new life in our relationships!

To anticipate in faith the new life that the Lord wants to guide us into...sounds good! Let's be in prayer for one another, to experience forgiveness and to extend forgive over the next four weeks. I'm excited to experience what God has for us!

This is a real website, really their picture. The following are real apologies found on one such website created for the sole purpose of receiving anonymous apologies:

To all the customers who got sneezing powder in their flowers last Tuesday, I apologize. I was trying to get back at my boss.

You who were waiting for the car to get out of the parking space so you could back in, and I slid forward. I am sorry, I desperately needed to use the bathroom. My apologies.

To all my high school classmates, I am so sorry for coming to school without brushing my teeth. You tried to hint but I didn't get it.

For all the things that happened to you as a kid that I never knew about. Maybe you were told not to tell me, but I should have been there for you, and you should have been able to tell me anything. I am truly sorry. Mom.

Real apologies. Some humorous and some weighty. Some people don't know how to reach those they have wronged and some aren't ready to apologize directly to the individual.

I think we can probably find a part of ourselves in one or more of these.

A famous theologian named Paul Tillich once wrote, "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence." And to that quote, Hamilton adds three questions "implied in our existence" to which forgiveness is God's answer.

For that mother, "How do I keep bitterness, anger, hate, or the desire for revenge from consuming me?"

If you are the mother who feels great guilt because you didn't stop the abuse there are perhaps two more questions implied..."How can I be reconciled to the one I wronged?" And "How can my burden of guilt be removed?"

Every one of us have asked ourselves questions like these. And God's answer to each of them is forgiveness.

Hamilton purposes, if we are not to spend our lives stumbling in the dark as wounded, angry human beings, we must know and carry with us the answer – God's answer: forgiveness.

The first place to start when trying to make sense of forgiveness is to talk about sin. And I know as soon as I say that word, you will all cringe on the inside. And minds and hearts will shutter themselves and block me out.

Because preachers have historically beaten people up with that word. They have frightened and intimidated people into loving God and behaving, which doesn't work by the way.

And confusing people by often calling something sin that isn't sin...like playing cards, dancing, watching movies.

But when sin is understood correctly, it can serve a very useful purpose, one we can be extremely grateful for. Sin can guide us, direct us, usher us into the Lord's presence.

Our sin can lead us to draw near to the Lord and experiencing healing and a lifting of a load off our hearts.

And when we do that, we can experience forgiveness in Jesus' love and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

And all of that leads to relief, to peace, and acceptance, and in feeling forgiven and washed clean. And experience a deeper knowledge and appreciation that we are individually loved and forgiven by Jesus.

But we have to talk about the reality of sin.

The Greek and Hebrew words most often translated as sin in the Bible refer to "missing the mark". If you think of archery and an arrow missing the target...that's the idea.

Or the other image or phrase “straying from the path”. Picture a sheep...wandering off the trail and getting hopelessly lost. That’s what sin does to us. We are that sheep.

What is implied is that there is a target and there is a path. That there is a way that we are meant to follow, a way to live and behave, and act. Not everything goes. There is a way we are meant to follow to have a proper relationship with others and with God. We don’t get to define it. God has done that.

And that way...is the way of love, a lifestyle of love...following Jesus by loving others. We are meant to love, do justice, care for people, serve others, to put the needs of others before our own. To say no to ourselves for the sake of others daily.

We are meant to tell the truth, be faithful, be kind and compassionate, give generously, and listen carefully.

And, if we did those things all the time...there would be no need for forgiveness.

I think most of us would agree, no matter our faith background, that there is a way we’re meant to live. A path we are meant to walk. And I think most of us would agree, most of us struggle in walking that path.

Adam and Eve in the Garden, they struggled and strayed from the path. God said ALL of what God had created was theirs except that one tree over there. Stay away from it. But they couldn’t stay away from it, were tempted and fell.

And we have been struggling and straying ever since. Some read that story literally and others figuratively, but all would agree both point to our struggle with rules, limits, and staying on the path.

Sometimes, our straying from the path is inadvertent, unconscious, more like an oops! Apparently, Hamilton has a lead foot when he drives resulting in speeding tickets. But it wasn’t an intentional act of the will. More of an oops!

Sometimes though, we know what we are doing. We know the path but we step off with intentionality and attitude.

Like a cat knocking a glass of water off the table...while looking at you! Nobody steps off the path with intentionality and attitude like a cat!

The path calls for honesty about ourselves but it's so much easier to blame the other person, or overlook a personal character flaw. Honesty might lose us the deal, or cost us more in taxes, or embarrass us, or make us look weak. So, we step off the path.

And we live into Adam and Eve's story all over again. We experience what they experienced...where healthy autonomy turns into unhealthy ego.

I become the most important thing in MY life. I become the center around which the entire universe revolves.

Only thinking about what will make me happy? I begin to care less and less about you as I go after what benefits me. I ignore your feelings while seeking to avoid suffering or any need to sacrifice on my part.

I stray.

And the more it happens, the further I get from the path. The more I head into a hopelessly lost condition...again.

And the distance between where we are and where we are meant to be...widens. We feel a wall around us cutting us off from others, that gulf widens between ourselves and God.

All of that is sin.

At this point, about where we need to bring this to a close...part two is next week; but now we may be feeling a little uncomfortable, sensing a need for forgiveness, a desire to clean the slate with God and others.

And that is a good thing! But I don't want to leave you hanging.

I think there is some work we can do together before we move into Communion. And even in Communion we are encouraged to do more of this work of coming to the Lord's Table, the perfect example of God's forgiveness of us, with a clean conscience.

But for us now, for us here, let's close off with a prayer in lieu of a Time of Reflection. I want to give everyone a chance to draw near to God and do some important spiritual work.

Let's pray.

Good Shepherd,

I come to You with a humble heart, Lord, burdened by my sin. I have strayed from Your ways, spoken words I regret, and acted in selfishness. Forgive me, Lord, for all I have done and left undone. Wash me clean and restore me to Your path. Thank you for your unfailing forgiveness. Amen.